

Ghanaian Immigrants in United States: American Dreams, a Shattered Heaven, & Racism

Author: Eric K. Asuo-Mante

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Boston College

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Department of Sociology

**GHANAIAN IMMIGRANTS IN UNITED STATES:
AMERICAN DREAMS, A SHATTERED HEAVEN, & RACISM**

A Thesis

by

ERIC K. ASUO-MANTE

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Abstract

Ghanaian Immigrants in United States: American Dreams, a Shattered Heaven, & Racism by

Eric Asuo-Mante. Advisors: Professor Sarah Babb and Professor Eve Spangler.

In recent years, African immigrants have become a large and growing segment of the American population. Like most migrants in the United States these travelers seek to attain the American Dream; they therefore mostly journey to the U.S. in the hope of bettering their lives as well as their family relations back home in Africa. But despite the continually increasing African demography in America, there is a lack of literature on the experience of African immigrants in the United States. This research is an ethnographic study of a sole group of African immigrants in America: Ghanaian migrants. This paper focuses on learning about the life experiences of these settlers before and after they migrate to the United States. Questions that this research addresses include: Why do these migrants journey to the U.S.? What ideas do these immigrants have about the U.S. before migrating to this nation? After arriving in America do their preconceived ideas change or remain the same? How do the Ghanaian migrants change their life to adapt to the American culture? What are their views about American culture and life in the U.S.?

Eguwayi foie ansana nsu re beto.

-Fanti Proverb

[*English literal translation*: The bathroom becomes wet before the rain falls]

Devi fi me tsa du o la, ye gblor na be ye dada koe nye nudada.

-Ewe Proverb

[*English literal translation*: A child who has not travelled outside the home claims that the mother is the best cook]

Mbre pipim a wuye aponkye dei, wu ye dein ara ahoma su wu kwon.

-Akan Proverb

[*English literal translation*: As long as you remain a goat, no matter what you do there shall always be a rope around your neck]

Ne nku meia o la, megbaa o.

-Ewe Proverb

[*English literal translation*: If the eye doesn't go red, it won't go blind]

Abua bi beka waa, na efri wun tuma mu.

-Twi Proverb

[*English literal translation*: If an animal will bite you, it will come from your own clothes]

There was a Naughty Boy

...

There was a naughty boy,
And a naughty boy was he,
He ran away to Scotland
The people for to see-
There he found
That the ground
Was as hard,
That a yard
Was as long,
That a song
Was as merry,
That a cherry
Was as red-
That lead
Was as weighty
That fourscore
Was as eighty,
That a door
Was as wooden
As in England-
So he stood in his shoes
And he wondered,
He wondered,
He stood in his shoes
And he wondered.

~John Keats

Na Akora Boni bi wo ho

...

Na Akora boni bi wo ho,
Na oye akora boni paa,
O jyani ko Scotland
Na nkrofu o hu ye-
O ho o hono se
Na efom
ye din,
O ho o hono se yard
e wa,
O ho o hono se eyom
ye de,
O ho o hono se cherry
eye kokoo,
O ho o hono se lead
emu ye du,
O ho ohono se aduowutwie
na eye aduowutwie,
O ho ohono se epono
ye edua,
Tise dei ewo England-
Nti o gyina ni mpobua mu
Na ogwini ye,
Ogwini ye,
Nti o gyina ni mpobua mu
Na ogwini ye.

~Twi Translation of John Keats'
poem

Ghanaian Immigrants in United States: American Dreams, a Shattered Heaven, & Racism

Since its dawn, immigration has always been part of the American experience. The Founding Fathers of this nation were of European descent, and since then America has become a nation composed of people from all racial/ethnic backgrounds around the world. After its description as a melting pot, and popularization of the term by Israel Zangwill in his 1908 play *The Melting Pot*, in which he wrote, “[T]here she lives, the great Melting Pot. Listen! Can’t you hear the roaring and bubbling?” (as cited in King, 2000, p.14), the United States is one of the most admired countries in the world where foreigners immigrate or wish to visit once in a life time; in other words the U.S. has become the Mecca of the free world.

The immigrants who journey to this nation bring with them myriad cultures and life styles which act together to affect the United States society. The number of immigrants in the U.S. has increased over the years. In the past 30 years, 23.8 million immigrants were recorded as residing in the U.S.; in 2000 about 29 million migrants lived in this country (Clark, 2003, p. 31). These immigrants arrive from all parts of the world, and their influence on American culture while presently felt also echoes across future generations.

In recent decades, Africans have become an increasingly important immigrant group to the United States. Africans have become an integral part of the U.S. skilled and unskilled population migrating from developing countries. Between the years 1981-2000 African migrants to the U.S. doubled, from 176,893 to 354,939 (Arthur, 2008, pgs. 1-3). Targeting a particular group of African migrants, this thesis will mainly focus on settlers from the West African country, Ghana. To answer questions such as why Ghana, and the nation’s importance to the U.S., the country will be introduced and brief information of its ties with the U.S. will be given.

Ghana, located in West Africa sits on top of the Gulf of Guinea. It is bordered to the west by Ivory Coast, to the east by Togo, and to the north by Burkina Faso. The West African nation is divided into ten regions, with each region governed by a regional minister. Ghana has a rich, but often overlooked history with the United States of America. During the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, its location by the coastline of the Atlantic Ocean made Ghana one of the main African nations where the slaves were “stored” before transported to the Western world. Some natives of African-American descent can trace their roots to Ghana.

The first president of Ghana Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, “received [his] Master of Science degree in Education from the University of Pennsylvania [in 1939]” (Nkrumah, 1957, p. 32), and thirteen years later was awarded the honorary Degree of Laws by his alma mater. His education in the university taught him the necessary skills required to help Ghana gain its independence from their colonial masters, the British on March 6, 1957. The Ghanaian former Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan furthered his education at Macalester, a liberal arts college in St. Paul, Minnesota (Traub, 2006, p.29). Former Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, as well as current president Barack Obama all visited Ghana. The three U.S. presidents hailed it as a model democracy in Africa as it is one of the most politically stable nations on the continent. There are close political and diplomatic relations between Ghana and the U.S.; as a result of these ties, many Ghanaians emigrate to the U.S. daily. Ghanaian migrants can be seen among the top five African immigrants living as permanent residents in this nation (Arthur, 2008, p. 3).

My interest in this topic is due to the fact that I am a first generation Ghanaian immigrant, who emigrated to the U.S. with my family of five in May, 2002. I lived in Ghana for sixteen years before journeying to the U.S. I completed grades ten through twelve in high school and I

am currently studying at Boston College. My life in Ghana gave me first-hand experience of life encounters the average Ghanaian faces daily. From personal experience and knowledge, just as Waters (1999) discovered in her research, I know that most Ghanaians travel to the U.S. to seek economic welfare.

This research is an ethnographic study of a group of Ghanaian immigrants settling in the neighborhood of East Hartford, Connecticut, with one participant residing in Boston, Massachusetts. I am particularly interested in learning about the life experiences of these settlers before and after they migrate to the U.S. Questions that my research could help answer include: Why do these migrants journey to the U.S.? What ideas do these immigrants have about the U.S. before migrating to this nation? After arriving in this nation do their preconceived ideas change or remain the same? How do the Ghanaian migrants change their life to adapt to the American culture? What are their views about American culture and life in the U.S.?

To summarize my findings I discovered that the Ghanaian research participants migrated to the U.S. either due to economic or for educational purposes. Most of the study participants had grandiose, imagined ideas about a perfect America; they all had dreams, hopes, and aspirations before migrating to this nation. After arrival and forced to face reality the image of a Heavenly America (as was described by most) got shattered and they complained of a difficult world to settle in. The last aspect was always topic of racism which they felt was very much a part of American life. But, despite their experienced hardships due to varied reasons some participants claimed it was still better to reside in America than in Ghana, while some spoke of regret and a wish to vacate this nation and settle back in Ghana.

Methods

I engaged in open-ended interviews with ten Ghanaian migrants who had resided in the United States of America for at least a year or more; I used this particular time frame because from experience I realized that was usually how long it took most immigrants to get oriented with life in the US. All but one of the study participants were based in East Hartford, Connecticut. There are a great number of Ghanaian immigrants residing in East Hartford, CT, so that made it a suitable location for this research. The only interview conducted outside Connecticut was in Boston, Massachusetts. The research participants consisted of 5 females and 5 males. I collected the data over a period of 4 months. I gathered my research participants mainly through a snow-ball sample. I began from a local Ghanaian church in the city and went from there. Before each interview I contacted the participant to set up a time, date, and location of their preference. During each interview session a total of 10 semi-structured questions were posed to the interviewee, which allowed for open-ended answers. At the end of each session I asked the interviewee if they had anything they wished to include that was not covered in my questions. The shortest interview lasted for a little over 30 minutes and the longest almost 2 hours.

In the following section each interviewee will be briefly introduced according to the interview timeline; name, setting of interview, how long the session was, and a short description of each participant will be given. Actual names of the participants have been changed in order to protect their confidentiality. Only the actual words of the interviewees will be used verbatim in the write-up of the findings section.

Note: According to Ghanaian culture titles such as Auntie and Wofa (translated to mean Uncle) will be attached to the names of the participants as a form of respect.

Study Participants

Auntie Naana

She is a 55 year old mother of 3 who owns an African supermarket which she runs with her husband in the town of East Hartford. Auntie Naana said she was born and raised in Accra, the capital city of Ghana. She journeyed to the U.S. in 1982, and has been in Connecticut for almost all her stay in this country. Auntie Naana appeared to be a very business-minded woman, and was extremely duty-conscious. Due to her busy schedule, she requested we met at her supermarket for the interview; she therefore paused at various times during our meeting to attend to customers. Overall, her interview lasted a little over 50 minutes.

Auntie Mabena

A 24 year old Registered Nurse; she graduated from a prestigious 4-year college in Connecticut which is mostly known for its excellence in nursing. Auntie Mabena was born and raised by both her mother and grandmother in a small village called Kpando, in the Volta region (located to the East of Ghana). She journeyed to the U.S. at the age of 12 in 1999, to join her father whom she barely knew growing up. She currently works at one of the hospitals in downtown Hartford. Auntie Mabena now has her own well-furnished apartment, and she reflects the image of an accomplished lady. Our scheduled interview took place in her apartment after what appeared to be a long day at work for her. Our meeting generally lasted almost 45 minutes.

Wofa Amoako

Uncle Amoako was the boyfriend of Auntie Mabena. He is 24 years old and currently enrolled in a nursing program at a state school in Connecticut. He was born and raised in the twin-city, Sekondi-Takoradi, located in the Western region of Ghana. At the age of 12, he journeyed to America with his mother. Uncle Amoako joined the Navy during the George W.

Bush administration where he functioned as a medic; he was deployed to Iraq twice in his 5 year service. Throughout our interview Uncle Amoako appeared as a very energetic and engaging young man. He told a story of how all he knew growing up was the fishing profession in his hometown, and how he might have at this moment been a fisherman had he not come to the U.S. He described that as a sad life and proclaimed his gratitude for been in America due to the myriad opportunities in this country. My interview with him took place at his girlfriend's apartment during one of his visits and it lasted a little below 45 minutes.

Wofa Debrah

Born in Kumasi, Ashanti Region (located to the East of Ghana), Wofa Debrah is 44 years old. Wofa Debrah said he was mostly raised by his grandmother in his youthful days. He came to the U.S in May, 2005 and has generally resided in Connecticut. Wofa Debrah, presently unmarried has two children in Ghana aged 10 and 18 who he financially supports. He currently works at a factory located in East Hartford where he labors on a glass welding machine. Wofa Debrah appeared to have lived a very comfortable life in Ghana, but claimed he journeyed to America in search of “greener pastures” and also due to his curiosity to “taste” how it felt to live among white people. He presented an image of a person who was very interested in learning about his historic past, and told many stories about life as a kid as he grew up mainly with his grandmother. He claimed he enjoyed been close to his grandmother because she was full of historic facts and knowledge. Wofa Debrah's scheduled interview took place in his rented apartment with a roommate and it was close to 2 hours.

Wofa Quansah

He is a 58 year old retired school teacher. Wofa Quansah was born in the Volta region (located to the East of Ghana). He recounted a personal story about how he got caught up in the

Liberian Civil War during the 1990s. Wofa Quansah said he went to Liberia as a school teacher but could not leave the country before the civil war broke out between Charles Taylor and the Liberian national army. According to him, he spent almost a year before he was finally able to escape from Liberia. Wofa Quansah declared that based on the brutality and war's effect on him, his sister who was then residing in the US invited him so he could have a change of mind/environment. He came to the U.S. in 2000. He now currently works as a live-out Nurses' Aid, and resides in East Hartford with a roommate. Our interview took place at his apartment and lasted for a period of almost 2 hours.

Wofa Kwame

Wofa Kwame is a 54 year old librarian at a well respected 4 year university in Boston, Massachusetts. He was born and raised in a little village about 10 miles from Kumasi, Ashanti Region (located to the East of Ghana). Wofa Kwame said he got his first degree in the University of Ghana, Legon. He came to America in 1982 to further his education in a Pennsylvanian school which had an accredited library science program; he received his PhD in Library and Information Science at the institution. Wofa Kwame currently divorced has 3 children, he teaches library science programs at his present university. He presented the image of a person who was very involved in church activities; he attends a local Catholic church about an hour's drive from the school. My interview with Wofa Kwame was at the librarians' lunch room and lasted close to an hour.

Auntie Enyonam

She is a married 34 year old, stay-at-home mother. Auntie Enyonam lives in a house with her husband and their 2 young girls in East Hartford. She was born and raised in Tema--about 30 minutes drive from the capital city, Accra. Auntie Enyonam confessed to me that she called

Ghana everyday to keep in touch with her family, especially her mom. She said her sole aim for journeying to the U.S. in April, 2004 was to go to school and become a teacher, because that was the profession of both she and her husband in Ghana. Auntie Enyonam was sad about the fact that her goal had not yet been achieved but was optimistic for the future. Our interview took place at her house and was an hour, eight minutes.

Auntie Ama

(Auntie Ama's interview was mostly tape recorded in Twi, one of Ghana's national languages, and translated into English during the transcribing process) Auntie Ama is a widowed, 35 year old mother of two children. She was born and raised in Kumasi (located to the East of Ghana); she came to the US in 2002 with her husband and they both resided in Connecticut. Throughout her interview, Auntie Ama presented a very pessimistic account of the life difficulties in the U.S. and sounded as if she were ready to vacate this country at any second. She said what kept her here was the fact that there was an extended family and two kids to financially support back home in Ghana. She planned to leave the U.S. as soon as she gathered enough money. She currently works as a live-out Nurses' Aid. My interview with Auntie Ama took place at the family friend's house she currently resides in since her husband's passing. She found the interview process very engaging and our meeting lasted an hour, eleven minutes.

Wofa Kofi

Uncle Kofi is a 36 year old, married father with one child. He lives with his wife in a rented apartment in East Hartford. Due to the nature of American life/jobs his child is currently in Ghana being catered for by family relatives. Uncle Kofi was born and raised in Abelempe, Accra. He migrated to the U.S. in 2003, with the sole aim of completing his education. He was in his 2nd year at the University of Ghana, Legon, when he left and immigrated here. Throughout

our interview, Uncle Kofi kept referring to the fact that he planned to finish his education, marry, and give birth to a kid in America so the child could be a citizen and enjoy the benefits that come with it in this nation. Uncle Kofi currently works as a computer board technician at a factory in the Hartford County. Though he has not yet finished schooling, Uncle Kofi is optimistic for the future and hopes for the best. Our interview was at his apartment and lasted for 52 minutes.

Auntie Afua

She is a 33 years old lady who was born in Kuyanko, in the Central region of Ghana, but raised in Tema (a city 30 minutes drive from the capital city, Accra). She journeyed to the U.S. in 2008 with no family relations in the nation, but just one friend in Virginia whom she lived with before moving to settle in Connecticut. I had a very engaging interview with Auntie Afua, though her interview was the shortest; a little over 30 minutes. Throughout our meeting, she made sure to carry her point across about how much she had regretted journeying to the U.S. This was because according to Auntie Afua she was well established in Ghana; she owned her own restaurant, and led a care-free, fun life. But all of a sudden she journeyed to a nation where even her residence was a problem; Auntie Afua currently resides in an apartment with a family of four with whom she had no prior relations before journeying to the U.S. Our interview took place in the family's apartment. She presently works as a Nurses' Aid, but was home due to absence of job cases. Auntie Afua also complained her social life has greatly suffered due to the individualistic culture in the U.S.; she plans to journey back to Ghana as soon as she straightens out her immigration documents in this country.

Literature Review

Immigration is a big part of the American experience; in 2002 about 34 million immigrants lived in this country and with their children totaling almost 32 million, there were about 66 million foreigners in the United States making up almost 23% of America's population (Deaux, 2006, p. 1). In recent decades, the profile of American immigrants has changed, with non-European immigrants coming to make up the majority of the immigrant population, changing the face of the United States. After Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 the new amendments affected the rules regarding immigration to the United States; since then this nation has undergone significant changes in its demography (Green, 2002, p. 17-18). The African American population has increased over a third, the Latino population has almost tripled, and since 1965 the Asian Pacific American population is nearly 9 million; out of four Americans, one is expected to be a person of color (Hing, 1997, p. 2).

What are the lives of these new migrants like? Due to the significance of immigration in American culture, there is a large and growing literature on the experiences of new migrant populations. Some examples include Waters (1999) on West Indian immigrants; Zloniski (2006) and Trueba (2004) on Mexican immigrants and Conley (2004) on the experiences of immigrants from South East Asia.

African immigrants represent a growing presence in the United States. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act benefitted African migration to this nation, and the State Department's Diversity Program (Visa Lottery) implemented in 1990 greatly helped African immigrants who wished to journey to America. The Visa Lottery program made it possible for an average of 20,000 Africans to migrate to the United States annually within an 8 year period, and in 1998 about 21,000 African migrants journeyed to the United States through the program

(Konadu-Agyeman, Takyi, & Arthur, 2006, p. 5). These statistical figures have increased steadily over the years. However despite the progressive rise there is little work available on the experiences of African immigrants in the U.S. A few exceptional examples include: John A. Arthur's (2000) *Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States*, Kwado Konadu-Agyeman, Baffour K. Takyi, and John A. Arthur's (2006) *The New African Diaspora in North America: Trends, Community Building, and Adaptation*, and Yoku Shaw-Taylor and Steven A. Tuch's (2007) *The Other African Americans: Contemporary African and Caribbean Immigrants in the United States*.

One of the primary reasons that immigrants, including African immigrants, come to the United States is economic betterment, or as is colloquially referred "to live the American Dream." In his description of the American Dream William A. Clark (2003) wrote, "How can one define a dream? It obviously varies for different individuals and families. At the same time... some common elements: a reasonable income, secure housing, and political freedom [are perceived]. The process of attaining the American Dream is in essence the process of becoming middle class, becoming homeowners in (often forgotten) communities, and participating in the political process" (p. 6). Most immigrants hold on tightly to the American Dream ideology as they believe through journeying to America their economic status will undoubtedly get better. There are varied ways through which natives of other countries come to formulate and grasp onto the American Dream idea of economic success. Waters' (1999) in *Black Identities* revealed that one way was through studying and listening to family/friends that either resided in America or journeyed back to their native countries to show off their supposed economic prowess (p. 82-83). Clark (2003) argued that the American Dream image has mostly infiltrated various

countries across the globe through the U.S. media which has caused an influx of many migrants into this nation:

American movies and TV programs provide powerful media for creating and vehicles for transmitting the images of American society worldwide—the allure of opportunities for individual advancement beyond a person’s region of birth.... [And these images are] certainly a powerful part of the imagery which is influencing the large-scale flows of boat people from Cuba, the substantial influx of immigrants smuggles from China, and the daily flows of undocumented migrants from Mexico. A common refrain bears out the hope of succeeding in America, and the lack of opportunities in their home countries often serves to reinforce the power of the American Dream (p. 10-11).

Thus the dream of economic betterment lures many immigrants who journey to a land where many opportunities are believed to abound, and their chances of succeeding appear to be greatly enhanced; some journey to the U.S. in search of their piece of the American pie. But the experiences of these immigrants in pursuing the American Dream are not always uniformly positive. Waters’ (1999) in *Black Identities* interviewed a number of West Indian immigrants to find out their dreams/perceptions before journeying to the United States and their views after migrating here. In one of Waters’ (1999) interviews she asked a 42 year old Jamaican female teacher:

Q: What had you heard about the United States before you arrived?

A: The United States was this place where you got everything so easily. You could become wealthy; it had all you could want. You got schools, people come here to study.... Housing, everybody lived in nice houses and they wore nice clothes, you could have six cars if you wanted to. You know, life was fun.... But when you got here [U.S.] and you had to pay bills and, even though you might work, a little money does not meet all the living costs. It’s such a different life, a great disappointment I must say... (p. 81).

Waters’ (1999) then explained:

This is the classic immigrant dream—to make enough money to return home in style, to buy a house where one can be comfortable, and to be in a place where American dollar goes a long way.... [But] Many individuals were shocked by the level of poverty they encountered when they first arrived... While both the teachers and the food-service workers were shocked at the degree of poverty and

decay in inner-city neighborhoods, the teachers were also concerned about the downward mobility they faced (p. 81-83).

The immigrants always displayed shock and disappointment not only because they discovered in reality America was a difficult nation to reside in, but also at the fact that the idolized American Dream life was a lot more difficult to attain than most were conditioned to believe before they journeyed to the U.S. Besides the unexpected reality of their encounters in the U.S. most immigrants also complained about the prevalence of racism in this country. Waters' (1999) reported, "... almost everyone we spoke to was unprepared for the degree of interpersonal racism they encountered in the United States-the overarching concern with race in every encounter, the constant role race plays in everyday life, and the subtle experiences that tinged with racial suspicions and overtones" (p. 153). Christian Zolniski (2006) in *Janitors, Street Vendors, and Activists* also confirmed the immigrants' racist encounters when he wrote:

... the one factor that consistently came up in my conversations with Bay-Clean janitors, and that seemed to upset them the most, was the lack of respect with which their supervisors treated them. The janitors angrily complained about insults, threats, unfair treatment, and the general contempt with which they were treated and interpreted it as a direct assault on their personal dignity. Luis considered this lack of respect to be an open form of racial discrimination... (p. 55).

But, despite their racist encounters and dealing with the harsh life realities in the U.S., the American Dream ideology of economic betterment never seemed to fade from some immigrants' mind. Zolniski (2006) reported, "Despite this [hardships faced by one migrant] like many other poor immigrants I met in San Jose, Arturo seemed to prefer living in poverty in the United States than in Mexico. "Yes, you can earn more here, but you are still poor. Here one is also poor, but it is better to be poor here than there, because the little money one earns here stretches further; here money buys you more things," he explained" (p. 93). This situation arises because some immigrants feel by living in the United States their chances of some day attaining the American

Dream and living better lives never actually diminishes. Therefore, some go as far as wanting to naturalize and become American citizens as they believe they would gain better access to the opportunities this nation has to offer. Arthur (2000) in *Invisible Sojourners* touched on this issue when he noted:

Immigrants who become United States citizens acquire rights, privileges, and benefits including the right to vote, to carry an American passport, and to sponsor immediate relatives to come to the United States. According to one recently naturalized immigrant, “American citizenship has enabled me to obtain [an] American passport. So far, I have used it for travel to Africa and Asia. Since becoming a citizen, I am accorded a degree of respect which I did not have previously when I traveled with my Nigerian passport...” (p. 131).

On the other hand, some immigrants were discouraged by their life experiences in America and wished to make as much money as they could and hurriedly return to their native countries to permanently settle there.

This study specifically looks at the experiences of a group of Ghanaian immigrants in the United States to help contribute to literature on the American dream, and to help address the lack of literature on the experience of African immigrants in the United States.

Findings

After analyzing the interviews 3 main themes stood out. These themes were: dreams and hopes participants had before journeying to the United States, the image of a heavenly, graceful America got shattered after residing in this country and most interviewees complained of a number of difficulties, and the incidence of racism. Some ideas also developed under these umbrella topics will be highlighted during the discussion of each main theme. When the 3 principal themes are combined overall, my findings suggest that these immigrants came with

unrealistically high expectations about what their lives would be like in the United States. In spite of their disappointment, however, many of them continue to pursue the American Dream. *Each major theme will be introduced and discussed separately in narrative form with specific examples given for each.*

- **Dreams and Hopes Before Journeying to the U.S.A**

All interviewees but one declared they migrated to the United States to seek a better life or as one put it “I came here purposely to seek greener pastures” (Auntie Afua). There was the overall belief that there were myriad opportunities in the U.S. For example, when he was asked his reason for migrating to the U.S., Wofa Amoako replied:

Why? For a better life! I mean when it comes down to it that’s it for a better life. Umm, there’s just so much opportunity over here [U.S.] you cannot pass it up, it’s just so much. And, of course it’s not gonna be handed to you it’s difficult, but you have the chance to go for it if you want. That’s all anyone could ever ask for that’s why I came over here. I mean at that time I didn’t know that, that was my mother’s dream for me, but you know growing up I see that that’s what she wanted.

The one interviewee who spoke of education, said he came to the U.S. to “get an education, well to get higher education” (Wofa Kwame), as a librarian.

To the research participants’ the idea of an opportunity-filled America was synonymous with leading an economically better life or acquiring better education in the U.S. I noticed the idea of an opportunity-laden America strongly fueled their dreams and hopes before each migrated to the U.S. Each interviewee in his or her own way communicated that it would have made no sense to pass up on the chance to journey to America when their openings came. They generally believed the United States was a land of opportunity and some claimed they would have done anything just to visit here at least once in a lifetime. This idea was best communicated by Auntie Afua who exclaimed, “O, I’ll kill myself to be there!” when she was

asked, when you were in Ghana and heard the nation or the word America, what's the first thing that comes to your mind? The strong inclination to journey to the U.S. was also viewed by all as a great prospect to help extended family members or even friends back home; this idea is elaborated below.

Each study participant in one way or another viewed journeying as a way to help their extended families in Ghana through remittances. For example, when asked, so are any of your family members dependent on you for monetary sustenance? Auntie Enyonam responded, "Yes. Basically my mom and dad, my brother, my cousins, uncles, and aunties, everybody back home actually expects money from you; because we traveled with the idea of making money and building family back home, making family life better back home. So when you get the opportunity to travel you become the sole money tree person for the family." The "money tree" theme was communicated in varied ways by my interviewees. Economic remittances mostly served as a principal reason for coming to America. The importance of economic remittances was also discovered by Water's (1999) during her research in *Black Identities*.

As already mentioned about half of the participants said they came to the U.S. to seek higher education. This is because in Ghana, both the public and private educational institutions are on a pay-as-you-go basis¹, and until recently there were only 15 universities in the whole country, making admission difficult. And sometimes even after acquiring college degrees, graduates are forced to sit at home intermittently while they search for the almost deficient job opportunities or works that pay well. Therefore some participants journeyed to America for the

¹ In Ghanaian educational system, regardless of socio-economic status all citizens pay out-of-pocket school fees either for self or one's children from nursery right up through the university level. And at the college level there is the absence of loans or grants, only (if not recently changed) a \$300 per year loan for 2nd year students and above which is strictly for only purchase of books. Also, coupled with the lack of job opportunities it is difficult for one to work and support self while attending an educational institution. Obviously, this situation poses myriad problems for people with limited or strictly hand-to-mouth form of living.

above educationally related reasons. Furthermore, though none mentioned this motive directly, another reason was because United States higher educational degrees are more internationally recognized than those from Ghana. This situation was apparent in Wofa Kofi's response when he declared, "I was in the University of Ghana, I was in the 2nd year and then when I had the opportunity I decided to apply for another university over here [U.S.] ... so I decided to come and then continue my education."

Still speaking about their dreams and hopes for America, some participants generally alluded to the fact that they came to the U.S. with an intention of readily acquiring material wealth/possessions. Auntie Afua communicated this idea when she claimed, "Just that for ... for worldly things and I thought when I come I can get whatever I want; like do stuff that I couldn't do over there [in Ghana]. But here [US] I know yes, I can make it because when they [friends residing in US] come they are able to build houses, buy cars, you know establish some kind of business. Life was rosy; you know when they come home so I thought yeah I'll go and see what's going on there...." These material possessions coupled with the mere fact of residing in America, some participants believed could earn them respect when they visited Ghana. Wofa Kofi explained, "you see if you travel you gain lots of respect among people; among your friends, among grown-ups, among every, you know if you travel, they think if you travel you have more knowledge, you have more experience than those over there so they give you that respect." The respect was viewed by some interviewees as earned and an additionally good enough reason to make the trip to America.

Furthermore some participants claimed they immigrated to the United States with the belief that once they arrived here they would instantaneously acquire riches, journey back to Ghana and lead luxurious lives. Auntie Ama spoke of this issue when she was commenting on

family/friends who visited Ghana after living in the U.S., she said, “So you think they [friends/family] have lots of money ... like it is, as if in America there is money lying on the ground. That’s what we all thought we think that there was a money tree here that if you come you can collect [laughs in disbelief].” The already mentioned “money tree” idea kept reappearing in all the interviews; many participants reported they viewed America as a land of riches because they thought there was money lying on the ground that people could collect for personal gain. Due to the inaccuracy of their “money tree” thought, I questioned its origin; in response all participants confirmed they got such notions both through the media and family/friends residing in the U.S. (*These two notions will be looked at in detail in the next section*) They claimed both American and locally made Ghanaian films communicated such incorrect ideas to them; this idea was addressed by Clark (2003) in *Immigrants and the American Dream*. On the other hand, when it came to relations they claimed American residents who visited Ghana did not report the truth. As a result throughout generations this wrong, imagined picture of America persists luring countless Ghanaians who wish to have a taste of the American Dream.

- **Shattering of a Heavenly, Graceful America and Complaints of a Very Difficult World**

Grandiose descriptions of America were given by all the participants. America was described as Heaven, a land full of riches, covered with lush green grass, no pot-holes, a land flowing with milk and honey etc. The question, when you were in Ghana anytime you heard the word America what was the first thing that came to mind, was posed to all participants. Examples of their responses are as follows: Auntie Naana said, “Well um, when I first heard about America I thought America was like in Heaven, and there was no sand; I mean, I mean

dirt, you know I thought there was no dirt in America.” Auntie Enyonam agreed, “America is money, America is gold, America is like ... milk and honey, America is full of plenty; no one goes hungry in America”

Another response was:

Anytime I hear of America I think about some beautiful green grass, I don’t even think about sand, I honestly don’t even think about sand. I’m thinking roads and nice green grass; a land that is so beautiful and so quiet you know somewhere so peaceful, somewhere there is everything, no stress The way I see it imagine one of those beautiful parks, that the green grass is all cut nicely, the roads are nicely clean and smooth ok, the cars are beautiful, no dirty cars on the road, every car is like wow, Mercedes and all that stuff, that’s how I see it. People are well dressed, the way they... I’m not thinking about homeless people ... those pictures didn’t come into my mind at all. I’m thinking that like wow, I don’t think that there’s poverty here (Auntie Mabena).

Another participant after readily responding “HEAVEN!” elaborated:

Yeah, (*laughs*) so actually when I was younger I swear to God when I went to church I really couldn’t differentiate between the difference of Heaven and America. Like I’m not joking when I think about it, it was really like that! Now I’m talking about like um, a 3 year old, 4 year old kid at church I really couldn’t differentiate, I thought America and Heaven was hand-in-hand (*Continues to laugh almost in disbelief*). So that should give you an idea of what people think about this country when you not here. Its wow, you know you hear the roads are made of gold, you hear you get paid to go to school, like all you gotta do is be a regular citizen and you get paid to go to school. Everybody here is rich; nobody cares about nothing like everything is handed to you like its Heaven! (Wofa Amoako).

Auntie Afua additionally exclaimed, “YES! I thought I was coming to Heaven, straight to Heaven! No ... I never knew America was right here on Earth. I thought it was in the skies. Because I was in a plane flying up high so I never thought it was going to land, so ... I thought I was going to heaven.” In general, a “Heavenly America” was the typical response I got from all ten participants. When asked how they came by these imagined pictures of America, it was then they admitted such ideas came from the media as well as family and friend relations who resided in the United States.

The picture of a Heaven-like America had strongly etched itself into the minds of most of my participants before they journeyed to the United States. As mentioned above they blamed the American and Ghanaian media as well as relatives/friends for their initial imbibing of the “not less than perfect America” ideology. Clark (2003) argued that the United States media communicates the American Dream ideals to other parts of the world and in many ways succeeds in convincing non-natives of a nation bursting with opportunities where their numerous wishes could come true (p. 10-11). Therefore the idea of residing in a world where one’s wishes could come true creates a Heaven-like universe for many third world nations around the world. Most of the people I spoke to fell prey to these thoughts and as such made it a point to journey to the U.S. to experience the almost “too good to be true” American Dream. Unfortunately, according to the participants the Ghanaian media has mostly bought into the idea of a “Heaven” America further reinforcing the inaccurate representation of this nation. So the cycle perpetuates and more Ghanaians as well as African immigrants continues to flock to this nation.

During my research I was curious to determine why there was the case of relatives/friends misleading many Ghanaians migrants into believing in a “Heaven” America. So I questioned Auntie Afua and she explained:

Q. I've been wondering throughout these interviews, do you know why, those from America who come to Ghana give a wrong perception of this country? Can you name any reasons why?

A. [Laughs out loud] I think they come home to show off or brag because ... we don't know what the hell they going through here.... And when they come and tell us stuff [the truth about a non-Heaven America or a difficult America to live in] we don't buy it we don't listen to what they are saying, you understand. Because if ... this is what you going through [i.e. experiencing a difficult life in U.S.], how come you still there....

I discovered that many Ghanaians had faithfully bought into the idea of a heavenly, graceful United States that almost any attempt to change that image was met by opposition. I realized the

“not less than perfect America” ideas were strongly imprinted in the minds of some Ghanaians that most readily refused to listen to the truth even when a Ghanaian settler from the U.S. tried to correct these inaccurate images. Auntie Ama effectively communicated this idea when she said, “I thought that America was in the sky, even though it is on this Earth. Because I remember one time my husband came to Ghana and they were, he was saying about America [that] potholes and something and one of my brothers said “O, keep quiet, keep quiet, maybe you didn’t go to America [laughs], are you trying to tell me that there is a pothole in America, then you didn’t go to America, you went somewhere. Maybe some village or somewhere you know.”” Thus the heavenly, graceful image of America was strongly upheld by most of my research participants before they journeyed to the United States. Some even claimed they avidly used to defend their “Heaven” America ideology before migrating to this country.

I got only one different response. The reply was from Wofa Debrah who said, “The first thing that came to my mind [when first heard of America in Ghana] was the ... slave masters Yes, because I heard about Americans and trading in human slaves during the slave trade, and so when I hear about America that’s the only thing that comes into my mind.” He was the only person who reported a negative preconception. But this response came after Wofa Debrah also admitted he used to perceive the United States as “Heaven.”

But after my research participants migrated to America each first went through a phase of disappointment (severity depended on the person) after discovering their grandiose, imagined ideas about the U.S. were in fact wrong. They quickly realized life was not as easy as most were conditioned into believing back home in Ghana; almost all participants admitted their let down after discovering nothing in America came easy. Their Heavenly image began to fall apart (the length it took depended on personal encounters) as they noticed both the media and

relatives/friends had caused them to create very erroneous ideas about the nation, America. For some it began when they realized the city and streets were not paved with gold; Auntie Naana spoke of this extreme disappointment when she emphasized:

Well ... lemme tell you this for a fact. When I came it was night time so you know you saw these lights, beautiful lights and you go wow, this is so beautiful! But the next day ... when I you know, I went out of the apartment to [a New York borough], I'm like is this the America they talking about? (*laughs*) I telling you it wasn't like what I thought.... [I] was like wow, is this beautiful the highways and all that, but the next day I'm like is this the America they talking about?

The disappointment displayed by some participants upon discovering that America existed on Earth just like Ghana, and that its streets were not gold-plated always reminded me of the fourth verse of John Keat's poem "There was a Naughty Boy." I noticed there were notable parallels between Keats' character's disillusioned realizations and my study participants.

Most participants also claimed their Heavenly America image began to fall apart after they recognized one had to work very hard in the United States just to survive, before starting to even consider attaining the highly upheld American dream. Wofa Kofi effectively addressed this issue when he admitted:

Q. Have your perceptions or ideas about this country changed in any way since you arrived?

A. It changed since the first year that I came here. I saw that not all that they tell us is true, you know they tell us ... something different and then you come in to the country and then you see something *totally* different. You know it's not like you come to the U.S. and then within a twinkle of an eye you obtain all those things that they had. You obtain the finances, you obtain the cars, you obtain all those things, not only in a twinkle of ... because ... one of my dreams, one of my hopes was to come within 5-6 years I'll be able to make it then I'll go back to Ghana. But, I don't think it's possible now, you know. Because ... it's not easy to get a job and then to fend for your family, it doesn't take like 1 or 2 years to achieve all that. It takes a time, it takes a while you know....

I received different versions of Wofa Kofi's response from almost all the participants. When reality started to set in, my participants started to become conscious of the American way of life, and their ideas of a Heaven-like America started to get shattered.

After admitting to their crumbling images/ideas of a Heaven United States, most respondents proceeded to complain about a very difficult world to settle in. Their reasons ranged from: encountering language barriers, seasonal changes, food differences, cultural differences (mainly communal versus individualistic form of living), to "the system" (which will be elaborated upon). An example about language barrier was given by Wofa Amoako who at age 12 was enrolled in 7th grade after he immigrated here with his mother. Wofa Amoako spoke of difficulties he initially faced in addressing his language problems in class. He recalled, "I never talked in class, I couldn't, I was embarrassed by my accent ... I'm not gonna raise my hand so these kids will make fun of my accent. So I just kept my mouth shut, like this happened throughout math class, so I'm just sitting there every day like the new kid, and there is no communication 'coz I can't talk to anybody." Furthermore, in discussing the language barrier issue most participants stressed how much they disliked hearing people say "you have an accent," anytime they opened their mouths to speak. They claimed the phrase made them feel different and in some cases prevented them from speaking all together. Wofa Debrah gave his views on this:

A. When I came here first it's like sometimes people feel like ... think I'm cool or I'm like timid or something like that, but that's not the problem. That's because after speaking with someone here ... the person will turn out and ask you what you said ... the person will just ask you what did you say or you have accent... It doesn't make me feel comfortable to speak much, you know so that alone is something else.

Q. Do you feel it ... creates a form of language barrier?

A. The barrier is there but that is not the whole issue, but the thing is the emotional feeling that you have. You know sometimes you've been here and you

know this is not your motherland or your country, so you cope with that and try to live ... but then you still have that kind of I mean emotional pain in you.

Most participants echoed Wofa Debrah's sentiments in various ways. While Wofa Debrah gave the solution to this issue as "when you speaking with a stranger who doesn't speak your language the only thing you have to do is to listen with your mind and ears," other respondents said they either tried to emulate the American form of speaking or just kept their original Ghanaian pronunciations. Wofa Kwame attested to this when he said:

Q. So since you arrived in America how did you have to change your life to adapt to the American culture?

A. ... So ... I don't think I changed the way I did things I learned to do things the way it's supposed to be done here but I also kept my own identity and kept my own ways of doing things. When I read in church I read as if I am reading in Ghana, I'm not going to read like somebody who was born here. And people in church understand that they may get used to it, but I also for example, I know in Ghana when we came we want to speak as fast as possible [like Americans here], but the faster you speak here the less people understand you....

The language barrier appeared to be a major issue faced by my study participants while they tried to fit into the American culture. Coming from a nation which has as many as 79 different spoken dialects, it was natural that my respondents encountered difficulties in attempting to get used to speak in a foreign nation that has only one main language- English. This is because even though English is the official language of Ghana due to its British colonial past, each dialect has its unique tone sounds so almost every ethnic group sounds a bit different when speaking the English language. But since it is widely accepted in Ghana that English is not the mother tongue no one actually pays attention to how one sounds when speaking the English language. So immigrating into a nation where everyone is mostly required to speak in just one language first appears as a daunting task for some. However the real frustration surfaces when one is either asked to repeat oneself or told "you have an accent." It immediately makes the migrants become conscious of their foreign background, and thus feel different. Therefore in

response, while some try to change their phonetic pronunciation to “fit in,” others feel the need to “rebel” as English is not their mother tongue. In certain cases some respondents felt they needed to learn the American pronunciation in order to be taken seriously in this nation, as some claimed once American inhabitants heard their “different accent” their chances of facing interpersonal racism would become greatly increased (*interpersonal racism will be discussed in greater detail in the final section*).

Besides language barriers, adjustment to seasonal changes and the struggle to get used to American food were other issues the participants brought up. But another major problem which almost all respondents complained about was that of individualism as opposed to communal form of living in Ghana. Respondents’ main issues with the individualistic culture in America were: the near absence of a feeling of togetherness or a sense of cohesion, and feelings of loneliness experienced in this nation. Auntie Enyonam spoke of this issue when she said:

A. The most important thing [is] getting into a family-communal-oriented culture [in Ghana], but unfortunately it’s not that way here. Unless you meet Africans who are very open and you know will open up to you. Americans in general are not communal people so it’s very hard to blend in when you come.

Q. They are more individualistic?

A. Yes, yes. Sometimes you even try to say hi to someone and they just pretend they didn’t hear you. When you really knew and you were looking right in the person’s eye when you said hi, but they just too full in their life no one will even talk to you, which you don’t do back home. No matter who you are when you say hi to someone the person has to say hi back to you. That’s another perception that I had ‘coz I thought everybody was friendly [in the U.S.] but, I came to learn no! It doesn’t work that way here, you mind your own business. Everybody minds their own business.

Auntie Afua addressed the problem individualism created:

Yeah, loneliness I mean like you been alone all the time ... you know that stuff [in Ghana] you have people coming to you, you enjoy yourself ... and when you do stuff like that, it helps you, it builds you up you know, like you always happy, you have a good spirit inside you. And in case you have problems you can share with people and stuff like that, and because that is not here that is why I think they always getting sick with stress and stuff; you know stress ... I’m still trying to

cope with that though but that is my main reason ... that it's been very, very difficult for me to apprehend, understand, and it's killing me.

Wofa Quansah further claimed the prevalent issue of individualism in the United States has caused careless situations where people seemed unconcerned about their neighbor or the well-being of each other's children, a situation he believed could lead to cases such as child truancy. He explained:

A. ... Yeah I feel ... down Africa the way we are brought up, we are brought up in a communal system. But here I see ... individualism is so much here. Like ... down Africa we have compound houses but here you have your room, you enter, you lock your door, nobody comes in. But down Africa a compound house ... from the beginning where my father and mother were staying with other people always you have to go and stay together. So individualism is much pronounced here than in Africa.

Q. Do you think it has a negative effect?

A. ... Yes it does. In Africa every child is everybody's child. But not that way here, so youth drinking etc. [is rampant]....

Absence of a sense of family in the general American culture was repeatedly stressed by each participant. All respondents reported that they grew up in extended families that either lived in the same house or in close proximity to each other. Each family was taught to regard members of other families as brothers or sisters and strive to live together in harmony. Respondents felt by living this way it reduced or avoided unnecessary quarrels and disagreements as each person looked out for the neighbor. Countless studies and reports have shown that African culture is mostly based on communal form of living; there is a greater sense of community reported among Africanized worlds than in more Westernized cultures. Therefore it was not surprising to hear such accounts given by the Ghanaian immigrants. Most participants believed if the United States were to become a more communal society the level of stress and loneliness could be greatly reduced in this nation. With no one to turn to when one is either unemployed or after a hard day's work they believed it was easier for depression to set in.

Individualism was perceived as a major issue in America than most Americans would care to admit. Its ensuing loneliness was viewed to be one of the reasons which made the United States a very difficult world to reside in.

Furthermore, my respondents routinely talked about what they referred to as “the system.” After further analysis I realized “the system” referred to the way America is structured as well as run; meaning its political set-up, educational set-up, the way the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and taxes function, the Emergency Medical Response (EMS) set-up, etc. Auntie Enyonam summed it all up by saying “I see the system as ... talking about the social security, IRS ... the federal estate agencies, all the things that come together to make America what it is.” All participants claimed “the system” becomes a problem when a foreigner is learning the rules of this nation and trying to adjust to them. One person like Wofa Quansah who spoke about the system in terms of American politics praised it as a good thing, because he claimed it disallowed cheating of American residents and also discouraged any form of corruption during voting and election times. Wofa Quansah particularly liked the discouragement of corruption as he felt that was what was killing African politics. Auntie Naana similarly supported Wofa Quansah’s point when she spoke about the U.S. legal structure:

Q. What would you define the system as? In your talking you kept saying the system so what do you define it to be?

A. The system is defined as the *no nonsense system*.... When I say that I mean it’s first thing first; first come, first serve like I said okay. When you go to like, unlike say, I’ll give you a typical example like in Ghana when you go to an office ... if you don’t give the secretary some money under the table, you know bribery, nobody will look at your face.... But here the law is this is the law, go by the law if you are able to go by the law nobody will take advantage of you.

But the system was viewed as a problem by many participants. I particularly liked the term “money buys money” used by Auntie Enyonam in her description of life in America. She said her main reason for coming to the U.S. was for education, but this meant going to school,

investing in yourself through loans, etc., to acquire a degree. But after that you have to pay back with money what you took from either the government or financial institutions. In applying this to the system description, Auntie Afua best illustrated the “money buys money” expression when she said:

By the system I mean ... what I've realized is you do everything to get the money, but the system will go round and then take everything back from you.... Yes. Because you'll work, you'll get the money, but the money goes right back to your bills, you know to everything, yeah. So at the end of the day you left with nothing, so it's like you work and then the money goes back. That's what I mean by the system, the system is like programmed in a way you know, you going to work you get this check, it goes back same week; you paying all, you know. It's like work, pay, you work and then your pay bills, that's it.

Auntie Mabena echoed Auntie Afua's sentiments when she spoke concerning a situation she encountered while in school. Auntie Mabena said she applied for state health insurance and was denied on the premise that she was working so could afford her own insurance. She said:

Q. When you say the system, could you expand more on the system?

A. When I say the system, the American system is made for success and at the same time failure; and the system meaning the way it is structured, the way everything is structured Let's say for instance that health insurance [the one denied her] what if I had quit the job and I was just going to school. Then [I] won't be able to buy the little, little things that I need for myself too, to give for myself, because I wanted health insurance. But then at that time because I am not working, let's imagine I ... [stopped] working, and I got the health insurance now I'm depending on the government right. I'm holding myself back, now I wouldn't be able to be in control because I will be helpless, I won't have money, then I will have to go to the government for you know food stamps, all that stuff, that's what I mean by *the system*, it holds you back.

Another person who viewed “the system” in a negative light was Wofa Debrah. He described it in terms of his perceived aspects of American society, specifically its individualistic culture and the consistent work with either very few or no vacation mentality. Wofa Debrah illustrated:

Q. In your speaking you did mention the system, what exactly do you mean by the system?

A. The way they live and ... yes I can say the way they live, and the culture is ... because it's like nobody relies on anybody in here...

Q. individualism...?

A. Yes, individualism because you can live in an apartment, I can live in a house and when something happen to you, you have no friend, you have nobody to call to you know. It's like either you call 911 to call the ambulance or something like that. Nobody have time for anybody because *the system* here as I'm talking about it's like work ... all the time and nobody has time for anybody, and nobody's matter concerns anybody. Because when you have problem either you take, you go to lawyer or you go the doctor ... because you don't have a friend or a brother to [visit] because everybody is busy doing his own thing, and nobody's problem seems to be somebody's problem, and so that's how I see it.

Even though “the system” was presented in various forms almost all respondents felt it was very much a greater part of American society. They believed to be able to survive or succeed in the United States one has to learn its structural set-up, in order words “the system.” Most participants hinted they were trying to cope with “the system” in America so they can at least get by in this nation. Coming from a country where: there is almost no Emergency Medical Service team on stand-by, the federal government set-up is not as strict, Internal Revenue Service's (IRS) activities is not as firm, and the communal set-up usually guides one's life, many Ghanaian immigrants usually end up becoming overwhelmed by the mostly perceived “rigid” life structure in the United States. Almost everything in this new world appears extra thought out and planned. Thus this situation causes some disorientation on the part of many Ghanaians. As such their attempt to make sense of American society leads them into first trying to breakdown the U.S. structural set-up and culture into forms the Ghanaian travelers can understand. Therefore by labeling the almost perplexing, “rigid” organization of the United States as “the system,” it can then be compared to the Ghanaian way of life and the migrants can begin to unravel American life in the hope of understanding it.

- **Racism**

All the interviewees spoke about racism. They generally concurred that racism is present in this country. Through personal experiences, participants claimed that while some white

Americans were openly racist, others were covert about their racist practices. I would like to use Waters' (1999) term "interpersonal racism" in my examination of this topic to illustrate how it relates to my respondents' experiences. Waters' (1999) characterized interpersonal racism as the palpable or sometimes furtive role race plays in one's daily encounters in the United States (p. 153). She gave two types of interpersonal racism, "old-fashioned racism and subtle racism."

Waters' (1999) explained:

Old-fashioned racism consists of blatant acts of discrimination and prejudice such as physical attacks or threats, insults on the streets, refusal of housing or employment specifically for racial reasons, and hassles or more frightening intimidation by police.... The other type of racism is more subtle, the modern kind where the perpetrator can deny any racial animosity and claim their behavior is due to other considerations. These subtle experiences often hurt as much or more- the daily hassles, indignities, and "bad vibes" that black people experience constantly in interactions with whites (p. 160, 164).

Bonilla-Silva (2010) in *Racism Without Racists* supported Waters' (1999) definition of "subtle racism" when he used the term "color-blind racism" to explain negative/covert racist experiences of minorities in the United States. In his brief illustration, Bonilla-Silva (2010) wrote, "In contrast to Jim Crow era, where racial inequality was enforced through overt means (e.g., signs saying "No Niggers Welcomed Here"...), today racial practices operate in "now you see it, now you don't" fashion" (p. 3). Similar to Waters (1999), he also agreed "color-blind racism" was the modern form of racism.

I will first discuss some of my participants' encounters with "old-fashioned" racism. Some of my respondents claimed that due to America's recognized past with slavery, and through the U.S. media they expected to experience this form of interpersonal racism before immigrating here. Nonetheless they admitted it always surprised them when they actually encountered "old-fashioned" racism. Auntie Ama who works as a live-out Nurses' Aid bitterly complained about her racist encounters with the elderly woman she cared for. She reported, "It

[racism] is very, very prevalent in this nation. Even today the job I went to ... the woman I take care of told me I'm a nigger.... [S]he beats me every day. She picks up objects and throws them at me; she picks up a chair, I'm telling you, every day...." When asked why she does not report the lady or vacate the job she responded, "[I]f you report who is going to listen to your case. If you think you can't do it then you stop and go your way. But if you think you want money and you have children to take care of then you keep quiet and stay with the job, yeah, you stay with it." Auntie Afua echoed similar experiences:

Q. What is your view about racism in the U.S.?

A. Yeah, I think it's still going on though. Yeah especially when it comes to jobs and stuff like that, you know....

Q. Do you have any personal examples or things you've seen, heard?

A. Yeah! Like ... I used to work with some people, some old folks who always say something bad to me all the time. Like you not supposed to be here with me, you supposed to be in ... you know something very disheartening. They always come out with comments that they even tell you they don't like you, so, yes.

Q. Was this due to the color of your skin?

A. Yeah, they'll tell you I hate your color you not even supposed to touch me.

Wofa Quansah continued:

I remember I was working at a place ... and then I was to paint their wash room. While I was painting an American guy came to me and he pretended he was going to help me to paint. In the course of the painting he asked me a question, "O, I hear they say people are still walking naked in Africa." I pretended as if I didn't hear the question, then he ... I wanted him to repeat the question. And so [repeated question] I said, yes people are still walking naked in Africa. Do you know you know you have an ambassador in Ghana, he's also walking naked! That was the answer I gave him. You have an ambassador in Ghana? He say yes. I say he's also walking naked in Ghana because all the people in Ghana are naked so he can't put on clothes.... When I gave him the [answer] he saw that he shouldn't have asked that question.

Examples of "subtle racism" given by participants included:

Q. What are your views on racism in this country? Does it exist? What do you think?

A. Yeah what I saw is ... people think ... people in this country are not racist, but then I see that most of them are *very* racist. But it's just that they don't show it; they will not let people know, but they're racist. You know I have few scenarios; I

have few personal examples ... maybe going to the bank to ask for a loan. They'll tell you they'll call you, as soon as you call the bank or you call any other person, and the person see that ... you're asking for a loan or you're asking for a favor from somebody if the person see that you have that accent then it will change. Sometimes you'll go to the bank, they look at you they talk to you and then the privileges that they'll give to somebody who is white will not be the same privilege that they'll give to somebody who is black. Especially if you have the accent you know, it's going to be different. Sometimes you go to a particular job and then how they portray blacks on TV and other stuff, you know the same thing you go to a job and people think you are black so you're nothing (Wofa Kofi).

Wofa Debrah added:

Q. If you feel like you want to talk about your work place definitely feel free, in terms of experiences you've had over there, like anything that surprises you or you viewed [as racism].

A. Well sometimes you ... I can't just understand but they know why they do that because they prefer that the American is the first priority. Because in terms you working with an American, they think he's the rightful person, the first person to be the rightful employee or something like that. And because that is like ... I can take my own as an experience, because I work in a certain office where I worked there for long, and they brought somebody for me to train him. And I trained the person [he was white] for like a week and we had a shut down for a week that [we] were supposed to go home for a week and then hear from the company. And this guy that I've trained for a week he doesn't know that I know he doesn't know much about the work we do in there, but he is under training, but when we were asked to go ... for the shut down he was asked to work in the office. But he doesn't know how to [operate the machinery]....

These unpleasant experiences mostly came as a surprise to some of my respondents because of teachings of kind treatment towards strangers in the Ghanaian culture. Auntie Enyonam explained:

Q. What would you say about race relations, or racism in the U.S.?

A. I believe racism is very high here. But like I told you earlier, we Ghanaians do not discriminate and we love foreigners. That's our culture teaches us to love strangers, even more than your own self. If you had a cup of rice for your lunch on a day, and you had a stranger visiting you have to offer that person that rice and you go hungry, that's how much we open up to strangers. So it's very difficult for people like us to travel here and to be open to people and they just shut off from you. Especially when you socialize with the real whites and they seem to tell you *indirectly* that no ... you are not one of us, we really don't appreciate you here! You know sometimes people tell you in your face, yeah, why are you here anyway?

Even though the respondents admitted racism also existed in Ghana, they claimed the level of “interpersonal racism” in the United States very much exceeded what was in Ghana. Born and bred in a nation where about 98% of the population is black, and the practice of striving to maintain cordial relationships with all, including even strangers, is constantly encouraged, it felt strange for most respondents to exist in a world where racism was perpetually present as if it were part of the U.S. culture. Despite Ghana’s racism at the day’s end all natives bore one color, so though it might be felt by some, racism was not as pronounced as it is in this country. But since one’s color serves as the basis for racism in America it is much easier for one to be singled out and treated negatively in the racist sense. The United States’ past and present is filled with stories of racism. Even the election of President Barack Obama, considered a landmark step forward from racism by most of my respondents, is a testament to the presence of racism in this country. Thus it is not surprising that the Ghanaian immigrants also witnessed the nearly unending presence of racist practices in America. My respondents considered Waters’ (1999) “subtle racism” or Bonilla-Silva’s (2010) “color-blind racism” to be the most dangerous form of racial practice. This was because whether perpetrated in a conscious or unconscious manner it was viewed as having the “smile on your face, stab you in the back” mentality. Therefore it was difficult to tell who your actual enemies were.

Also, further analysis of cases involving the respondents’ experiences of “having an accent” could be viewed as incidences of xenophobia (fear of strangers) on the part of some white Americans. This is because it is their “accent” that either causes the participants to avoid speaking all together or causes the white Americans to respond poorly to them. The respondents appear to get “bad reactions” from some American white people, which could be not only due to their race (in which case the American whites would be racist) but also because they are

perceived as foreigners. If the source of the white person's "poor" response to the respondents "accent" is because it identifies them as foreigners then that could be classified as situations of both racism and xenophobia. But considering the scope of this research I do not have enough data to fully address the case of xenophobia.

In continuation, due to their observance of the fact that racism might never be eradicated in America some of my respondents admitted that they have adopted the mentality of fighting back against racist practices. They explained it was not their plan to be disrespected by anybody. Auntie Naana communicated this when she asserted:

[W]hen I first got here anytime somebody used the "n" word or something like that you know I got hurt, but now I *don't care (emphasized)*. I don't care what I wanna get I will get it, so I don't care what you think or what you say; if I have to reply I will reply you if I don't need to I won't. You know so that's how it is (p. 4).

Wofa Kwame further emphatically said:

Q. So how do you classify racism or race relations in general?

A. I think when people are trying to prove that they are superior to you; people try I'm sure people try with me. I just, it's like don't even go there because it's not gonna work (laughs softly). If you are going to pretend you don't understand what I'm saying I'm sorry I think you only speak one language at least I speak 3 or 4 different languages so I try to get people not even to [be racist towards him]....

Some migrants viewed adopting a "fighting back" attitude against racism as the best way to survive in this nation. They felt if they act unconcerned they will never be treated fairly in this country. Since some perceive racism as an "undying sore" at the root of American society, they believe for them to attain their American Dream they would have to fight for it. Thus some of my participants have bought into the "fight back" idea, and they try to use it to their advantage if possible. Some migrants felt they did not fly thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean only to be intimidated by racist practices into missing their American Dreams.

Despite complaints by participants of a difficult America some claimed it was still better to be in the U.S. than in Ghana; this was mainly due to an abundance of opportunities in this country. For example, Wofa Debrah said at the end of his interview, “It’s good to be in America; America is a good place to be. They have wonderful people; wonderful system in America. When learn they learn a lot.... Saying this [negative aspect of US] doesn’t mean it’s not good to be in America; it’s always the best to be in America”.

On the other hand, some of the participants repeatedly declared they have regretted coming to this nation because the hardships were too much. They therefore planned to make/gather as much money as they could and leave for Ghana never to return to the United States. Others like Wofa Kwame plans to retire in Ghana instead of residing in this country. In the end, I discovered regardless of each respondent’s views about the U.S. most of them believe in, and continue to pursue the American Dream. The idea of an opportunity-filled America never vanished in spite of the experienced hardships and racism the respondents spoke about.

Conclusion

In this research, I conducted an ethnographic study of a group of Ghanaian immigrants in the United States with the aim of examining their life experiences before and after they migrated to America. I sought to answer questions such as why do these migrants journey to the United States? What ideas do these immigrants have about America before migrating to this nation? After arriving in this nation do their preconceived ideas change or remain the same? How do the Ghanaian migrants change their life to adapt to the American culture? What are their views about American culture and life in the U.S.?

After four months of research and intensive interviews I discovered my respondents journeyed to the United States mainly due to economic reasons (seeking economic betterment through striving to attain the idealized American Dream) so they could remit home to better the lives of extended family relations, and educational purposes. Before immigrating to the U.S. most of my study participants had inaccurate images of a Heaven-like America where the streets were made of gold, life was easy, and instant gratification of one's wishes occurred on a regular basis. But, after arrival and forced to face reality the image of a Heavenly America got shattered and all participants complained of a very difficult world to settle in.

Respondents discussed problems such as encountering language barriers, seasonal changes, food differences, cultural differences (mainly communal versus individualistic form of living), and "the system," which I learned was American's structural set-up. They gave these problems as some of the main reasons why life and culture in the United States were so difficult to adjust to. Another major issue my respondents brought up was that of racism. I used Waters' (1999) term "interpersonal racism" ("old-fashioned" and "subtle" forms of racism) to explain the experienced racism of my participants. With racism I personally discovered that no matter how it is perceived, racist practices are ever present in the United States. The native African Americans continue to complain about it, West Indian immigrants have cried out about it, and now Africans, Ghanaian migrants to be precise, also spoke about it. But hopefully these cries will someday die down. Furthermore, due to their undying belief in the American Dream, despite their experienced hardships some participants claimed it was still better to reside in America than in Ghana. While on the other hand some spoke of regret, a wish to vacate this nation and permanently settle back in Ghana.

It was my hope through this research to help contribute to literature on the American dream, and to help address the lack of literature on the experience of African immigrants in the United States. I hope more future studies will continue such research, because African immigrants are a large and growing segment of the American population.

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